

About Bison

Yellowstone National Park
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www.nps.gov/yell



Introduction

The bison (*Bison bison*) is the largest land mammal in North America. In a typical year, more than 3,000 bison roam the grasslands of Yellowstone National Park. Bulls are more massive in appearance than cows, and more bearded. For their size, bison are agile and quick, capable of speeds in excess of 30 mph. Each year, bison injure park visitors who approach too closely.

You must stay at least 25 yards away from any bison!

Bison in Brief

In North America, both “bison” and “buffalo” refer to the American bison (*Bison bison*). Generally, “buffalo” is used informally; “bison” is preferred for formal or scientific purposes.

For many years scientists considered Yellowstone’s bison to be a subspecies known as the mountain bison. Most scientists no longer make this distinction, and consider all bison to be one species, *Bison bison*.

Population

Varies from 3,000–4,000

Where to see bison

- Year-round: Hayden and Lamar valleys.
- Summer: grasslands of the park.
- Winter: hydrothermal areas and along the Madison River.

Behavior & Size

- Male (bull) weighs up to 2,000 pounds, female (cow) weighs up to 1,000 pounds.
- May live 12–15 years.
- Feed primarily on grasses and sedges.
- Mate in late July through August; give birth to one calf in late April or May.
- Can be aggressive, are very agile, and can run up to 30 miles per hour.
- Two subpopulations: Northern Range and Hayden Valley

History

- Yellowstone National Park is the only place in the lower 48 states to have a continuously free-ranging bison population since prehistoric times.
- By 1902, poachers reduced Yellowstone’s small herd to about two dozen animals.
- The U.S. Army, who administered Yellowstone then, protected these bison from further poaching.
- Bison from private herds augmented the native herd.
- For decades, bison were intensively managed due to belief that they, along with elk and pronghorn, were over-grazing the park.
- By 1968, intensive manipulative management (including herd reductions) of bison ceased and natural ecological processes began.
- A number of state and federal agencies cooperate in bison management because bison carry a disease of concern to cattle producers.

The Life of Bison

Cows, calves, and some younger bulls comprise a herd. Mature bulls, however, spend most of the year alone or with other bulls. The exception is during the rut, or mating season. At this time, in late July and August, bulls seek out females. They display their dominance by bellowing, wallowing, and engaging in fights with other bulls. Once a bull has found a female who is close to estrus, he will stay by her side until she is ready to mate. Then he moves on to another female.

After a gestation period of 9 to 9½ months, reddish-brown calves are born in late April and May. Calves can keep up with the herds about 2–3 hours after birth and are well protected by their mothers and other members of the herd. Even so, some are killed by wolves and grizzly bears.

Bison are sexually mature at age 2. Although female bison may breed at younger ages, older males (>7 years) participate in most of the breeding. In Yellowstone, life span averages 12–15 years, few individuals live as long as 20 years. Both sexes have horns, those of the cow being slightly more curved and slender than the bull's.

Many insects feed upon the bison, and bison will rub against trees, rocks, or in dirt wallows in an attempt to rid themselves of insect pests.

Birds such as the magpie “ride” a bison in order to feed on insects in its coat. The cowbird will also follow close behind a bison, feeding on insects disturbed by its steps.

Food

Bison are animals of the grasslands; they eat primarily grasses and sedges. Their massive hump supports strong muscles

that allow the bison to use its head as a snowplow in winter, swinging side to side to sweep aside the snow.

Predators

Adult bison had no large predators for many decades, but the restoration of wolves in Yellowstone has changed that—wolves kill some adult bison each year.

Scientists have also recently seen grizzly bears hunting bison successfully. Dead bison provide an important source of food for scavengers and other carnivores.

Bison History

At one time, bison spread from the Pacific to the Appalachians—but their main habitat was the Great Plains. Bison roamed there in herds that often numbered three to five million animals. Plains tribes developed a culture that depended on bison. Almost all parts of the bison provided something for their way of life—food, tools, shelter, or clothing. Hunting bison required skill and cooperation to herd and capture the animals. After tribes acquired horses from the Spanish in the 1600s, they could travel farther to find bison and hunt the animals more easily.

But European American settlers moving west during the 1800s changed the balance. Market hunting, sport hunting, and a U.S. Army campaign in the late 1800s nearly caused the extinction of the bison.

Yellowstone was the only place in the lower 48 states where a population of wild, free-ranging bison persisted. The U.S. Army, which administered Yellowstone at that time, protected these few dozen bison from poaching as best they could. The protection of bison in Yellowstone and their subsequent recovery is one of the great triumphs of the American conservation movement.

For More Information

www.nps.gov/yell
At visitor centers, ask for the free handout, Yell 298, When Bison Leave the Park
The educational bookstores in the park’s visitor centers sell many books about bison, including:
The Buffalo Book. 1989. David Dary
Buffalo Nation: History and Legend of the North American Bison. 1996. Valerius Geist.
Portraits of the Bison: An Illustrated Guide to Bison Society. 2005. Wes Olson.
To Save the Wild Bison. 2005. Mary Ann Franke.